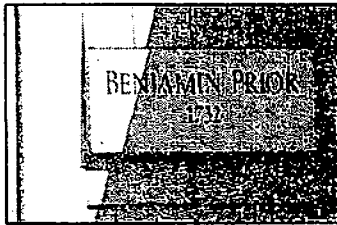


Spirits from the Past: The Ghost of Hitty Tom

Strange occurrences have been recalled over the years at the Benjamin Prior House, which have been attributed to the spirit of Hitty Tom. She was the last surviving Native American in Duxbury. How could this house built by a tanner in 1732 be connected to the town's last Native American?

The story begins with Benjamin and Deborah Prior's son Eliphas Prior, who with his wife Hannah, was the second generation to own the house. Eliphas was a cordwainer, but he also served in several important positions in town. During the Revolutionary War, he was the Town Treasurer and as such was responsible for purchasing the town's quota of beef and delivering it to someone appointed by the General Court.

Eliphas Prior, however, will be remembered for one single act he made during his lifetime by those believers



and witnesses of this home's haunting occupant. In January of 1786, Hitty Tom, who lived in a camp on the shore of Island Creek Pond near a small spring, died, leaving the townspeople with the decision of where to bury her. According to historians, there arose two factions in Duxbury – one which was willing to bury the town's last Native American in the Burying Ground (located on Chestnut Street), and the other who did not want her buried in their church yard.

That is when Eliphas Prior stepped in and resolved the issue by offering to bury her on his property. The townspeople gladly accepted, and Eliphas "took satisfaction in

digging the grave on the southerly end of his farm, adjacent to the Burying Ground, where except for a fence between them, Hitty Tom's grave is alongside the others," remarked Dorothy Wentworth, a former town historian. Hitty Tom, like most of the townspeople buried during those days, now rests in an unmarked and unknown grave.

Much has been told over the years of this Indian's presence in the Benjamin Prior House. Benjamin and his wife Deborah Weston Prior built the large house to handle their growing family. It boasts six fireplaces, two front parlors, three upstairs bedrooms, a traditional borning room, and two stairwells. Housed in a wall of pine woodwork with parson's cabinets, the large keeping room fireplace, including the original oven, is the site of much paranormal activity that is believed to be the workings of



Hitty Tom haunts this historical house built by Benjamin Prior in 1732.

PHOTO BY DEBORA KATZ

Hitty Tom.

Former owner, George Richards, who resided in the house from 1959 to 1979, described a conversation he had with Isabelle Freeman when she was 70 years old of an unusual experience she contributed to Hitty Tom. Isabelle Freeman was a childhood friend of Helen Alden, the granddaughter of Henry Fish who owned the house for

46 years. Isabelle often slept over in the house. "During one such sleep over, the girls slept in the room which now serves as a dining area with the large fireplace," he said. "During the night, the girls awoke to a loud noise and saw the wood pile that was stacked neatly on one side of the fireplace rolling and staking itself

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just as neatly over on the other side of the fireplace," said Richards, who has also encountered similar "ghost" incidents.



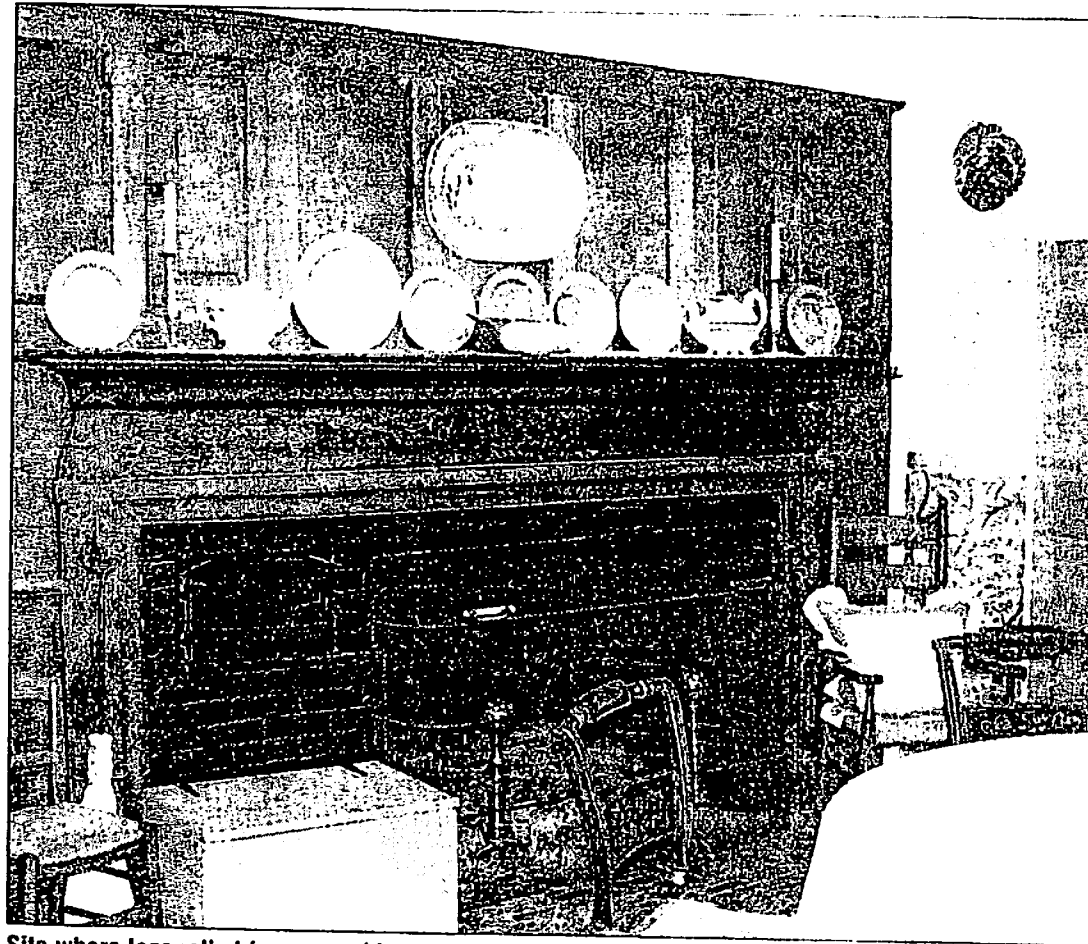
The burning room is another place where strange things have taken place. In a note from Isabelle Freeman, she remarks how "we were forbidden to enter that room; there was some talk of a suicide or murder in the little old burning room."

In 1998, I interviewed Helen Alden who was then in her nineties. She described another tale to me. Alden recalled how the house was part of the Underground Railroad for escaped slaves. "I was told many times about how the slaves were hidden in the barn and other places on the property while they were enroute to Canada," she said.

"One slave died there and was buried on the property. We (the children) were told never to go near the burial mound of this slave," which she remembered being in the front of the house down near the meadow in a field where they played.

Alden did not recall ghost stories of Hitty Tom, although she admitted "the house did make a lot of strange noises during the night." And according to Alden, she and Isabelle Freeman "did sleep in the burning room many times...and would awake in the middle of the night to a strange howling noise, and we would cling to each other" in fear.

Eleven years ago when current owners, Barbara and Morgan Lamarche, purchased the Benjamin Prior House they were unaware of the hidden treasures that existed under layers of paint and did not expect to become familiar



Site where logs rolled from one side to the other and restacked themselves.

PHOTO BY DEBORA KATZ



Adjacent bedroom room where a possible suicide occurred.

PHOTO BY DEBRA KATZ

with the home's haunting resident known by others as Hitty Tom.

They have since restored the house, making it one of Duxbury's finest examples of a 1700s home, with ghost tales, among others, becoming permanent fixtures. The couple has accepted the strange noises of their older home as just that although they jokingly blame Hitty Tom when something odd occurs, like a mirror suddenly falling from a wall without breaking.

Those who decide to accept and live with a ghost find ways to live harmoniously with their spirit. Many experts on paranormal activity believe this can be achieved through a number of ways, such as including the

ghost during family functions by setting a place for the ghost at special meals or celebrating the spirit's actual birthday. They also suggest giving the ghost a name and talking to the ghost when you sense its presence.

The LeMarches, without realizing it, have done many of the things paranormal experts recommend to those living with a ghost. Each year Barbara Lamarche sets a place for Hitty at the family's Thanksgiving Day table. The couple named their 20-foot fishing boat The Hitty Tom. "Doing those things makes her a very benign ghost," chuckled Barbara Lamarche.

Next week in this series we will visit the historically haunted places of Washington Street.